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ABSTRACT

A study examined how Swedish parents discipline their 1- to 6-year-old children. Data were collected from 200 families, using two instruments which were both employed in previous studies: the EAS Temperament Survey and the Manageability Index. Other methods used included interviewing mothers about family demographics and a "parental modernity scale" which measured parents' traditionalism and progressiveness. Findings from the study of Swedish parents were compared to findings from earlier studies on the United States and Bermuda in terms of six categories: (1) physical punishment; (2) physical restraint; (3) reasoning, or child-centered explanations for why the child's behavior was inappropriate; (4) coercive verbal control; (5) low use of authority; and (6) behavior modification techniques. Compared to subjects in these other studies, Swedish parents were found to display low use of authority, a high level of verbal coercion, and a low level of physical punishment. (Charts comparing the findings to the results from earlier studies on parenting in the United States and Bermuda are included.) (AJH)

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HOW PARENTS DISCIPLINE YOUNG CHILDREN. CULTURAL COMPARISONS AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Introduction

In Sweden, a ban on physical punishment and other demeaning discipline practices by parents was enacted in January 1979, following more than a decade of legal reform that removed legal protections for parents who beat their children. This meant that no one may expose a child to corporal punishment or other insulting treatment without being subject to criminal laws that apply to the same behavior directed toward other adults or another person's children.

Official statements about the law (SOU, 1978) maintain that physical punishment, and mentally humiliating and dismissive treatment, lead to "lack of self-esteem, and a personality change that may leave its mark on the child throughout childhood and adolescence, and which may affect it as an adult." Based on psychological reseach, the Commission asserted that physical violence fosters violent behavior in the next generation. Three purposes for the law were stated: first, to inform the public that beating children is not permitted; second, to stress to parents the importance of good care for their children; and third, to reduce the number of acts of physical violence against children.

The law is an example of the view that children's well-being is a collective responsibility; the government is charged with protecting children's interests and implementing policies that foster their development.The law reflects a cultural belief that family autonomy is secondary to the protection of children.

Given the high degree of public interest in the topic, there are remarkably few, even unpublished, studies of Swedish parents' disciplinary beliefs and practices (Edfeldt, 1989; Ahgren-Haeuser, 1988). Edfeldt's 1980 survey of 1,200 Swedish parents, which he compared to Gelles's U.S. sample (Gelles, 1979), found that, one year after the aga law, Swedish parents used only half as much physical punishment as American parents, but admitted to past violence at the same level as U.S. parents. Edfeldt concluded that the aga law had a positive effect in reducing parental use of physical discipline.

What is Discipline?

Discipline is behavior by an authority to induce change in the behavior of a subordinate. In the parent-child case, parents use mild to severe forms of verbal to physical incentives (positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment) to prevent, control, and induce child behaviors the parents deem desirable.

The parental Discipline Interview (PDI) (Scarr, Pinkerton & Eisenberg, 1989) assesses ways in which parents discipline children. It was developed to, as unintrusively as possible, elicit information about disciplinary behavior which is seldom directly observable. For ages 37-60 months the PDI includes 5 vignettes about dressing, shopping, bedtime problems, taking a toy and running into a street.
Interviews with fathers and mothers revealed 6 different discipline types: Coersive Verbal Control, Low Authority, Behavior modification, Reasoning, Physical Restraint, and Physical Punishment.

Developmentalists have theorized about the effects of parental discipline on children's outcomes for generations. Whatever the dominant child rearing theory of the era, be it learning, cognition, or behavior modification, developmentalists have spelled out the implications of parental discipline for children's development in that framework. Advice to parents, then, followed. Under Skinner's influence, physical punishment was seen as an ineffective and inadvisable discipline technique (e.g., Becker, 1964), but that view has been challenged for different cultures (e.g., Payne, 1989). Rather, severity of discipline (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Wu, 1991; Strauss, 1991) is currently proposed as the important dimension, as is reflected in Swedish law.

Does the aga law represent a consensus among Swedish parents about child rearing that is seldom violated, or does the law represent an ideal of Swedish parenting that is observed by most, but not all, parents in some, but not all, circumstances? The passage of legislation, does not imply that Swedish parents never use physical punishment on their children under any conditions. Rather, we expect that they use it less frequently than for example North American parents. Other forms of discipline, such as physical restraint, behavior modification (e.g., isolation), and reasoning are predicted to be more frequent among Swedish parents. Given the importance of discipline to overall child rearing effects, it is important to understand how Swedish parents think about discipline and to obtain data on their disciplinary practices.

In this study of Swedish families, we use the same measures as were used in the U.S. and Bermuda studies lead by Sandra Scarr. We translated the forms into Swedish and adapted them slightly for the Swedish setting. The study is conducted in the south west part of Sweden (Göteborg, Halmstad, and neighboring communities).

The aim of the study was to investigate how Swedish parents discipline their 1-6 year old children. Only parents born in Sweden were included, in order to study the core cultural attitudes and practices in the country.

Methods

Sample:

In this project, we have analysed data from 200 families with children between the ages of 1 and 6 years. In most families (73%)(N=146), both parents were present and asked to take part in the study; single parent families were also included (15% mothers and 2% fathers, 4% father and mother devided the time caring for the child). (In 41 families, fathers and in 13 families mothers did not take part.) The families represent a representative sample of Swedish preschool parents, both acording to education and to occupation.

Measures:Child Assessments

Child assessments are focused on behavior problems and adjustments, which have been found in previous research to be related to parental discipline methods. Parents are supposed to use harsher discipline on children they perceive to have behavior problems and poor adjustment.

EAS Adjustment. Parents and teachers were asked to complete the EAS for each child in the study. The EAS Temperament Survey (Buss & Plomin, 1984) is a 20 item self-rating instrument with items scored on a 5 point Likert-type scale with a low score indicating the presence of difficult child behaviors and a high score indicating the absence of these behaviors. Mothers, fathers, and teachers complete this measure. A 4-factor solution, replicating the four original scales, was the best fit for parent and teacher ratings in the U.S. study: Emotionality (alphas = .76-.83), Activity (.63-.78), Shyness (.74-.78), and Sociability (.56-.64). Combined scales for mothers and fathers had alphas that ranged from .64 to .82.

The Manageability Index. Parents and teachers complete the Manageability Index. The Manageability Index (Scarr & Ricciuti, 1987), a measure of child behavioral difficulty derived from several other measures of child behavior, was completed by mothers, fathers, and teachers in the study. High scores on the 35-item, 5-point Likert-type measure indicate active, behaviorally difficult children, Unmanageable children. Respondents rate how characteristic these items are of the child. Alphas for all items in the total score were .92 to .95 for the three raters in the U.S. study.

Measures: Family Characteristics

Measures of the family's social, educational, and economic circumstances are predicted to be related to their discipline techniques within each ethnic group. Stresses that parents perceive and life events are similarly predicted to relate to individual differences in discipline. In addition, attitudes about child rearing -- the rights and obligations of children and

parents, and how they should relate to each other -- have been shown to be powerful predictors of how parents discipline their children. The final measure in this section is the Parental Discipline Interview, the measure of how parents say they discipline their children.

Family Demographics. A structured interview of mothers concerning household composition, educational attainments, occupational statuses, ages, and marital status (adapted from Scarr, McCartney, Phillips, Abbott-Shim, 1993) were administered.

Parenting Stress Index (PSI): Parent Domain. The PSI measures stresses in two global domains of parenting: (1) parent's own characteristics of depression, role restrictions, competence, social isolation, spousal support, attachment to child, and health; (2) stressful, difficult characteristics of the child. A low score indicates low stress. Alphas were .90 for mothers, .91 for fathers, and .92 for combined mother-father ratings for the Parenting Stress in the U.S. study. A shorter version of this measure, consisting of the 50 items with the highest loadings on the Parent and Child Domain scales, were used.

Stressful Life Events. The Life Stress Scale (Abidin, 1983), is a 21 item measure of stressful event such as a death in the family, change of job, or divorce. High scores indicate multiple stressful events in the prior twelve months.

Parental Modernity Scale. This is a 29 item, 5-point Likert scale which evaluates general attitudes about child rearing (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1981). Items reflect two attitude dimensions: Traditionalism and Progressiveness. A sample item from traditionalism is "The most important thing to teach children is absolute obedience to their parents". An item from the progressiveness scale is "A child's ideas should be seriously considered in making family decisions". In the U.S. study, factor analyses replicated the original factors for fathers and mothers. Alphas for mothers' and fathers' 23-item Traditionalism scales were .88 and .86; for the shorter (8-item) Progressivism scale, .61 and .65.

Parental Discipline. This measure consists of two sets of five vignettes of typical child misbehaviors, designed for children between the ages of 12 to 36 months and 37 to 60 months (Scarr, Pinkerton, & Eisenberg, unpublished). Discipline vignettes concern bedtime, safety, misbehavior in public places, refusals to be dressed, and sharing of toys. Each parent was interviewed individually and asked what discipline, if any, he/she would use the first time an infraction occurred; then the parent is prompted for a discipline strategy if the child misbehaved a second, and finally a third time. All interviews were audiotaped and then scored by trained coders.

The original 18 discipline categories have been condensed into six normally distributed variables. Physical Punishment, Physical Restraint, and Reasoning remained as scored. The remaining 15 discipline categories were grouped into 3 theoretically-based, larger categories, called Low Authority, Behavior Modification,and Coersive Verbal Control.

The interreliability between the Swedish and the American scorers provided alpha values between 0,58 and 0,97 for the five PDI categories.

Physical Punishment was defined as the parent's deliberate inflicting of physical pain, also termed corporal punishment. Specific terms used to identify this type of discipline are: slapping, spanking, whipping, hitting, paddling, switching, beating, pinching, shaking, yanking, grabbing or shoving with more force than necessary to move the child. Most parents reported "slapping their child's hand" and other mild forms of physical punishment.

Physical Restraint consisted of the parent physically restraining the child by holding them, grabbing their hand or otherwise physically confining them (putting a young child in a baby pen). This category encompassed physical actions designed to prevent the child from committing undesirable acts, not to inflict pain.

Reasoning was scored only if the parent gives an explanation of **why** the child's behavior is inappropriate, undesirable, dangerous as able to be appreciated from the child's point of view. For example, "You must get dressed because Mommy says so" was scored as Coercive Command, not Reasoning. "You need to get dressed because you will not want to miss our trip to the store" is a child-centered explanation and was scored as Reasoning.

Coercive Verbal Control included Coercive Commands, Reprimands, Threats, Angry Interrogations, Disappointment, and Withdrawal of Affection. This category encompassed stronger forms of verbal control, as contrasted with explanations or requests. In the U.S. sample, parents reported using harsh, coercive verbal discipline (commands, threats, reprimands) in about 1/3 of all incidents. By contrast, Withdrawal of Affection was reported by less than 2% of either mothers or fathers, and Disappointment averaged only 4% of discipline.

Low Use of Authority included Bribes, Distractions, Pleads, Requests, Delegation of Authority, and Redefining the Situation. This category focuses on parents who do not assert authority with their children. Rather, the parent construes the situation to suit the child, so that no conflict can arise.

Behavior Modification Techniques included Isolation (Time Out), Ignore, Withdrawal of Privileges, and Demand for Restitution. These techniques are theoretically the least intrusive and the most effective for achieving long-term child compliance (Viken & McFall, in press).

Results

Data from 200 families are analysed.

Insert fig 1 here (Parent and child characteristics)

Parent and Child characteristics Sweden discipline sample

184 mothers , 157 fathers.

PARENT	US mean	Mean	SD	RANGE	N
Mother's Age	32.39	33,6	5,49	20-48	184
Father's Age	34.84	35,92	6,25	22-51	156
Mother's Education	15.41	12,68	4,02	6-21	184
Father's Education	15.83	12,92	4,91	6-21	157
Mother's Occupation		25,05	9,86	5-45	184
Father's Occupation		27,36	10,74	5-45	157
Mother's Stress		127,07	101,48	0-636	183
Father's Stress		123,76	97,22	0-589	132
Mother's WAIS Vocabulary		46,91	11,78	0-64	182
Father's WAIS Vocabulary		47,78	11,51	13-64	129
Mother's Traditional Scale		48,73	12,79	24-85	180
Father's Traditional Scale		51,32	12,75	28-80	131
Mother's Mod Progressive scale		34,61	3,43	18-40	180
Father's Mod Progressive Scale		33,86	3,94	17-40	131
CHILD					
Age	31.3	51,09	17,34	18-88	185
Mo. Manageable		82,22	20,77	34-149	182
Fa. Manageable		83,48	20,44	37-137	133
Mo. Behavior Problems		102,42	10,79	40-118	182
Fa. Behavior Problems		101,53	9.85	58-118	133

Sample characteristics: In table 1 we see the means, standard deviations and ranges of predictor and childoutcome variables.

The children are between 18 and 88 months old, the mean is 51 months old. This is 20 months older than the North American study. Also our parents are 1 or 2 years older than the US Parents.

Discipline characteristics in Sweden :

Mean frequencies of answers in the 6 discipline categories for Fathers (N=134) and Mothers (N=183) in Sweden and the percentage of each category for mothers and fathers together. Figure 4 shows the parents discipline practices.

Discipline Category	M+F	M+F %	Mothers	Fathers
PDI 1 Coercive Verbal Control	6.90	30,7	7,14	6,57
PDI 2 Low Use of Authority	6.88	30,6	6,69	7,15
PDI 3 Behavior Modification	3.46	15,4	3,64	3,21
PDI 4 Reasoning	1.49	6,6	1,73	1,16
PDI 5 Physical Restraint	3.43	15,3	3,42	3,43
PDI 6 Physical Punishment	0.32	1,4	0,25	0,40

In Table 2 the percent and the differences in mean frequences between the answers in the 6 PDI categories of the fathers and the mothers are presented.

Insert Figure 3 Fathers and Mothers Discipline practices in figure 4, parent practices and in figure 5 we can compare the PDIanswers between Sweden, US and Bermuda. The Swedish parents' mean frequencies in the PDI categories are:

* less physical punishment,
* like US most answers are of low authority, and coercive verbal control
* physical restraint is used more and behavior modification is used less frequent in Sweden than in US and in Bermuda.

Insert figure 6

In Figure 6 the results are presented in percent and here we see that Swedish parents more often than the others use low authority and coercive verbal control. Low authority means

bribing, pleading, redefining discipline situations, and coersive verbal control is to use coersive commands, reprimands, threats, angry interrogations, disappointments and withdrawal of affection. Behavior modification is used as often as physical restraint. The interesting difference is that Swedish parents do not as often report physical punishment.

Discusson

After the second world war in Sweden more seldom auctoritarian methods are used to educate or to discipline children. Our attitudes are that parents ought to use methods reflecting egalitarian and less auctoriatarian values in their discipline technique. This is actively supported by Swedish family policy, which aims at giving families with children a living standard comparable to families without children. This is done through a combination of cash grants, social welfare services and insurance benefits.

In Sweden equality undergirds not only political values and the Women's Rights movement but also the Children's Rights movement. This movement has gradually shifted children from a powerless position to a position where they are accorded many of the rights of adults.

The 1979 law banning physical punishment expresses the right of children to be treated the same as or equal to adults with respect to any physical assault. The 1979 aga law states that " a child may not be subjected to physical punishment or other injurious or humilating treatment"

In Sweden "aga" means all forms of physical punishment whether mild or severe. The professional polling organisation SiFo has between 1965-81 periodically sampled Swedish public opinion about "aga". Results indicate that Swedish people esteem, and increasingly (35%-71%) thought parents, should manage child upbringing without "aga" be it a beating or all other forms of physical punishment. 1994 only 11% of the Swedish parents belives that corpural punishment is necessary in raising children.

The government has achived the goal of enabling parents to recognize that (1) even mild physical punishment has the potential to escalate to abuse, and (2) Physical punishment is not a constructive childrearing method (Hausser 1988) Also our results show that physical punishment is an unfrequent used discipline method.

It is interesting to se how Sweden uses physical Restraint more than US and Bermuda. Maybee the education of The childrens Wellfare centers will help families to use this method

instead of punishment. In Sweden 95% of all parents with children go to these centers to get health check ups and immunizations. Most parents also go there to special parental education groups where they discuss how to take care of the child in different respects. Child psychologists and nurses lead these groups. The aga law is always discussed in these groups and the parents are told that young children could be held instead of spanked in order to obey.

Low authority is the most often chosen discipline method when Swedish parents answer the PDI. What are the reasons to use low authority? The written information about the aga law to Swedish parents says that children do not want to obey if they are spanked. A much better way is to create " a relationship based on a continous interplay with affectionate parents or guardians which gradually will develop an inner voice within the child telling it what is allowed and what is not". 30 % of the answers are characterized as low authority. Low authority means bribing, pleading, or redefining discipline situations. It seems as Swedish parents think this might be a good way to get this inner voice.

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Discipline: Sweden

Fathers and Mothers

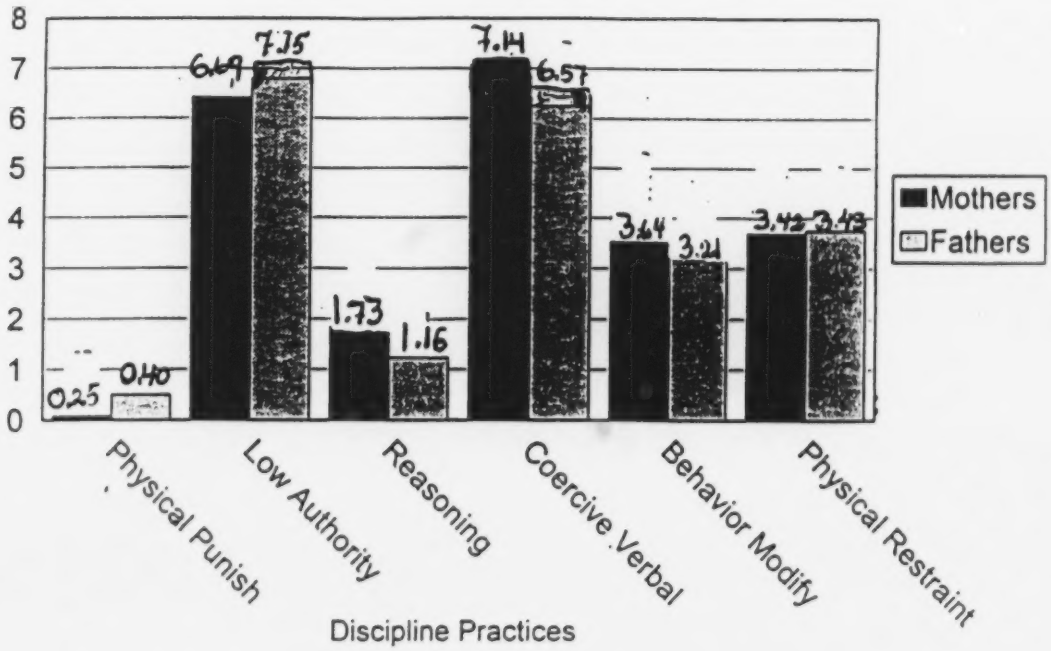


FIG 3

Figure 4

Discipline:Sweden

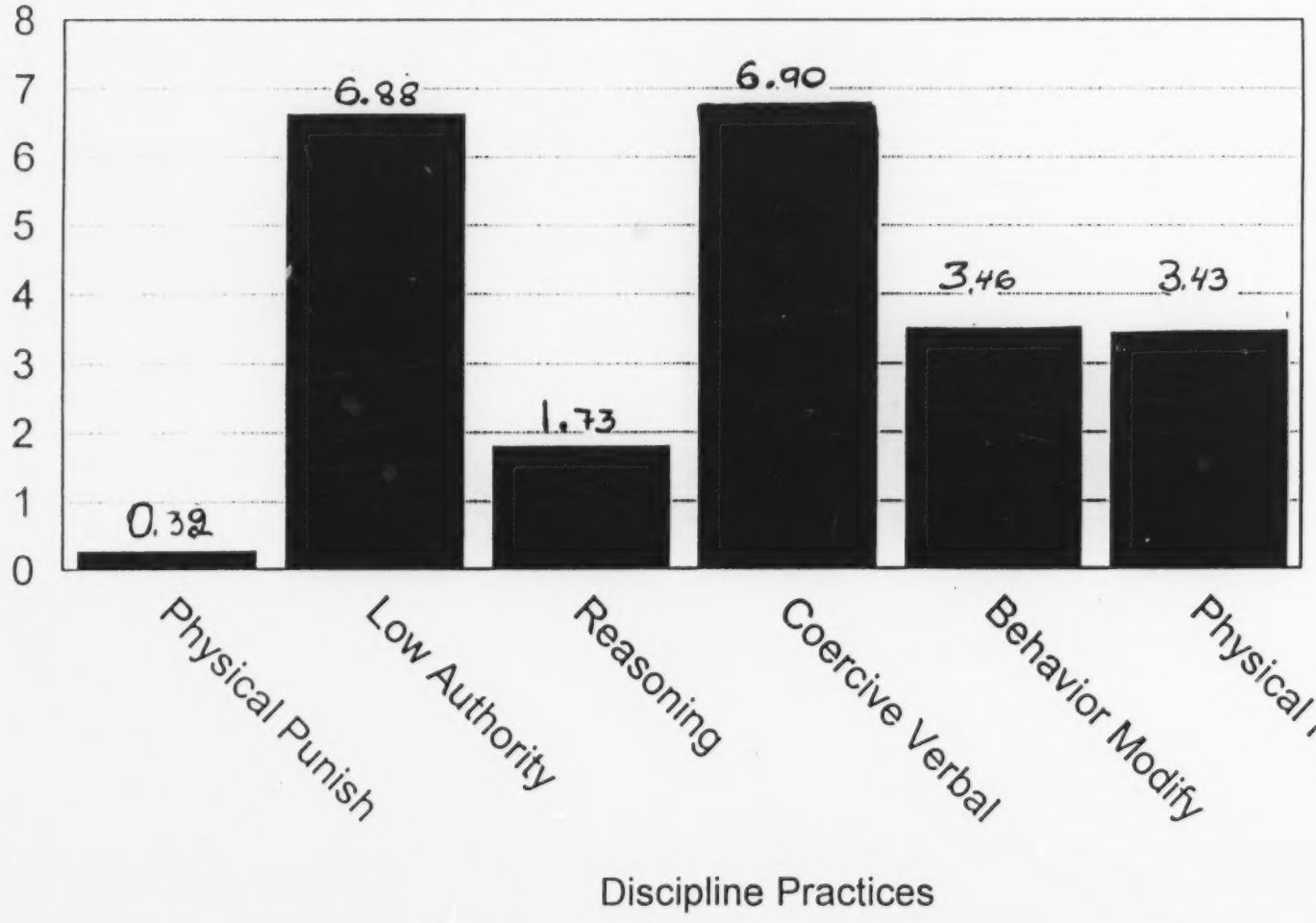


Figure 5

Discipline: Sweden, United States, and Bermuda

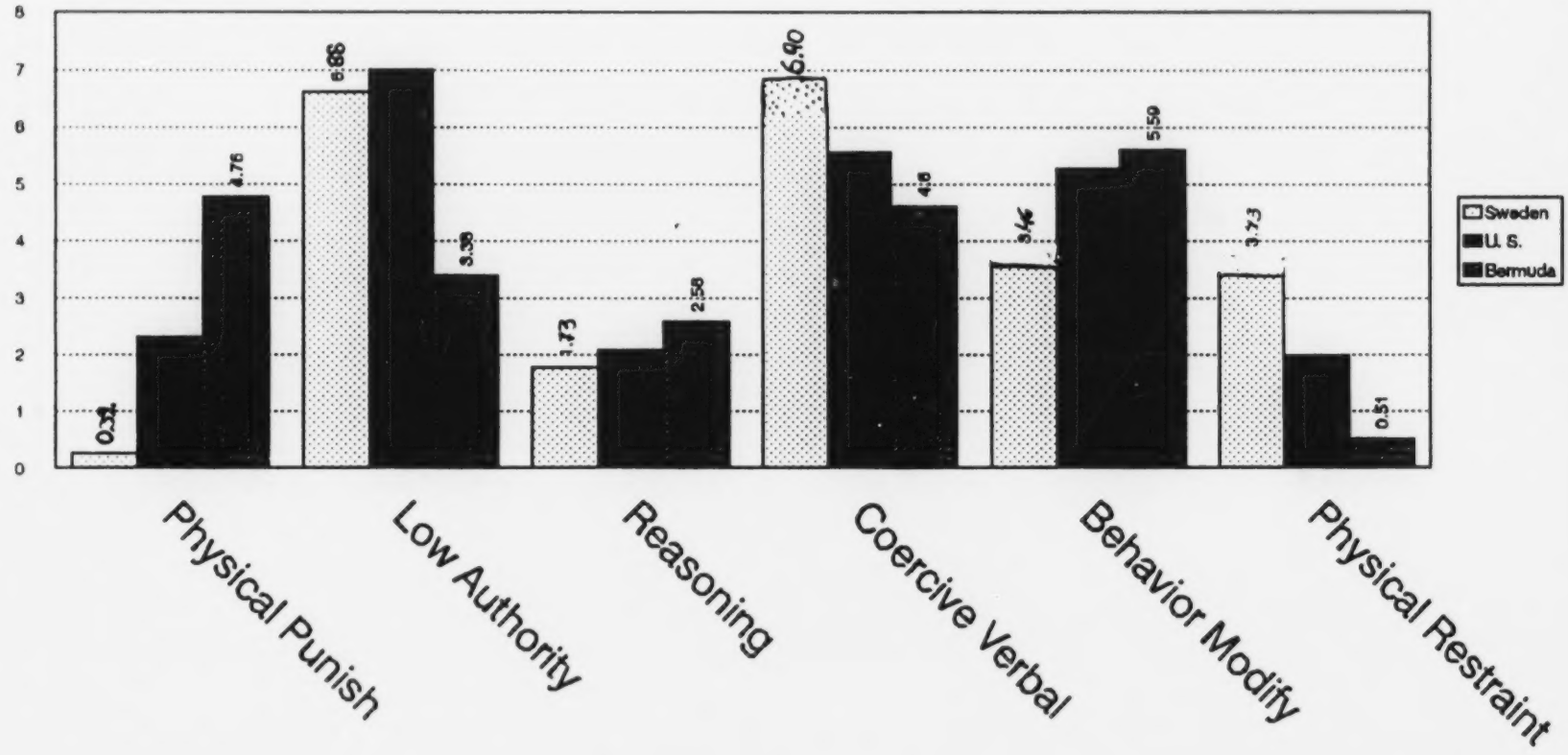
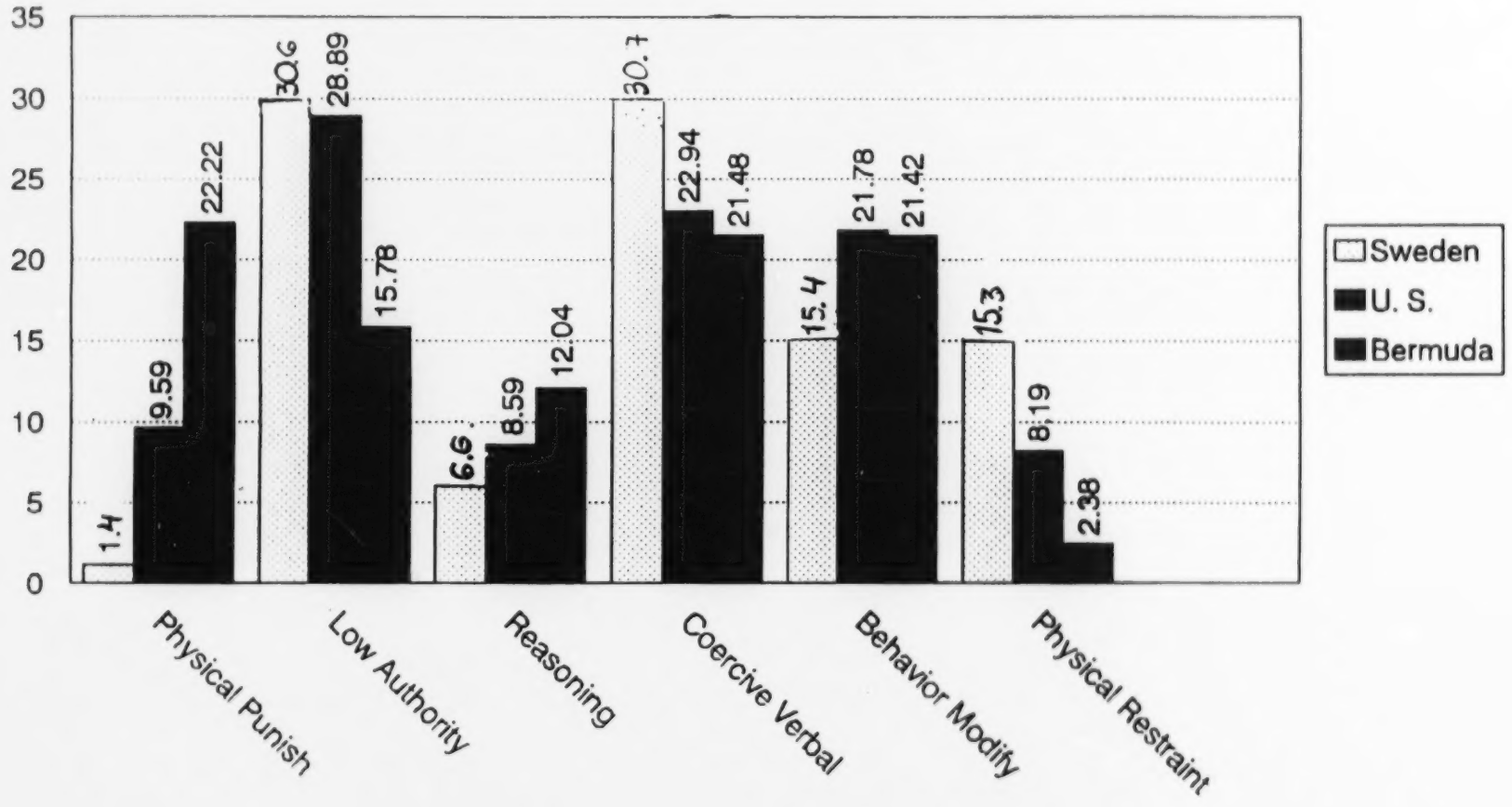


Figure 6

Discipline Practices Reported by Parents

Sweden, United States, and Bermuda



Percent Use in Response to 5 Vignettes